

# Contextual Understanding of Chinese Contemporary Design History Narratives: Grounded Theory Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article explores the context in which Chinese contemporary design history is situated, and distinguishes the differences between the modernity embodied in the contemporary contexts of East and West. This study adopts grounded theory to analyze the interview data through a three-level coding strategy, and focus on explaining the core themes formed by the selective coding. The study reveals three core themes to explain the contemporary context of Chinese contemporary design history. These core themes are the discontinuity between tradition and contemporaneity, the spatialization of time of historical evolution, and the contemporary design history dominated by popular aesthetics, which together reflect the special modernity of the contemporary Chinese context. The findings suggest that the narrative of Chinese contemporary design history needs to take into account the Chinese contemporary context, which fill the gap of the absence of Chinese contemporary design history in world design history. This study is the first application of grounded theory in the field of Chinese contemporary design history. As a result, these design history studies in developing countries can construct a contemporary design history that is different from the Western world, and then together constitute the world design history.

**Keywords:** China, contemporary, context, design history, grounded theory

## 1. Introduction

Context is an umbrella term for the geographical environment, traditional culture and social development. The narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history is closely connected with the contemporary Chinese context. However, the exploration of the context in which Chinese contemporary design history is situated has received less attention from scholars of both East and West. Moreover, the construction of a narrative model of contemporary Chinese design history is rare in research. In order to construct a narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history, it is significant to understand the contemporary Chinese context as the preliminary theoretical preparation.

Most Chinese scholars tend to explore ancient Chinese design history or use the traditional Western narrative model to narrate Chinese design history, thus neglecting the relationship between Chinese design history and the context in which it is situated. Due to this neglect of differences between the Chinese context and the Western context, most Chinese scholars' studies are merely repetitions of the Western grand narrative, resulting in the mismatch between the design history narrative and the Chinese context, which in turn leads to the absence of Chinese contemporary design history in the world design history. As an innovative qualitative research method, grounded theory can provide an entry point for understanding the context of Chinese contemporary design history through a three-level coding analysis strategy that focuses on explaining the core themes formed by selective coding, which allows the contextual understanding of Chinese contemporary design history to be grounded in objective data. Through the exploration of the context in which Chinese contemporary design history is situated, it is possible to distinguish the differences between the modernity embodied in the contemporary contexts of East and West, thus making a distinction between the traditional Western narrative model of design history and that of the Chinese contemporary design history. The study shows that the Chinese contemporary context embodies special modernity rather than ordinary modernity, and that the modernity embodied in the Chinese contemporary context and the modernity embodied in the Western contemporary context piece together the narrative of the world contemporary design history.

## 2. Research background

In the development process of world design history, the narrative center is normally situated in the context of developed countries in Europe and America. China, as a representative of developing countries, has a contemporary context that is different from that of developed Western countries. The design history research of China started in the 1980s, and the narrative approach adopted was more in line with the traditional Western design history narrative model. For example, in the design history written by Wang Shouzhi, he mainly described the history of modern design in the world, and his design history construction showed a tendency towards the grand narrative, which not only lacks the historical records of local Chinese design, but also lacks the necessary foundation of philosophical analysis in the historical narrative. In the modern design history edited by Guan Xiaohui, which aimed to illuminate the development of craftsmanship to modern design, the narrative theme was built on the basis of Western modern design. In terms of Gao's design history narrative, in the pre-history section, she provided a general and characteristic description of the craft period before the Industrial Revolution, which complements the shortcoming of the traditional modern design history of insufficient pre-historic description, but the modern design history she constructed emphasized Japanese design and is based on developed countries such as European and American countries. It is obvious that Chinese scholars tend to understand the history of world modern design as the history of Western design and the history of Chinese design since modern times as "Western design in China". This tendency not only leads to the lack of a unique design history narrative model, but also neglects the regional design history in developing countries such as China, Malaysia, and Thailand in the Asian region.

In addition, Western scholars ignored the development of Chinese design history in a particular context of modernity, so they understood the contemporary context of China as the contemporary context in the Western sense. For example, Ritzman(2010) provided a thematic narrative of modern design history in the West, starting from the design phenomena in Britain, the United States, and France, and mainly used the structure of chronology to narrate design history, which continues to the contemporary era; Woodham(1997) mainly adopted a modernist perspective to narrate modern design history, emphasizing and describing the social context and the diversity of historical contexts in which design thinking is located. The narrative of modern design is centered on European and American design. It can be seen that this narrative model lacks consideration of the history of design development in third world countries, which is not conducive to a global dialogue between East and West. In fact, the history of design development in developing countries is not a transition from modern to postmodern, but is in a co-existent state of a jumping nature, and the contemporary period in developing countries is a fusion of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern. Some scholars argue that this spatial chronology is due to the influence of colonial history or the lag of the industrial revolution, among other factors, which led to the remnants of feudalism or modernity in social forms . In contrast, the industrial revolution in developed countries clearly preceded that in developing countries. Although the history of contemporary design in the West has crossover parts in the local development of design history, the overall chronology is linear. In order to make the construction of Chinese contemporary design history relevant to the context and to participate in the discussion of world modernity, it is necessary to examine the real situation in China. At the same time, grounded theory is a methodology for understanding the real situation, which can provide an opportunity for dialogue between East and West.

Although many scholars have used grounded theory to explore some specific issues in Chinese context, few applied it to Chinese design history. For example, Wang(2021) has adopted grounded theory to understand the family relationships of middle-aged citizens in contemporary China. Through qualitative analysis, the study showed that there is a tendency toward lower class solidarity in Chinese cities as inter-generational co-habitation decreases; some scholars have adopted grounded theory to collect interview data on important issues involved in the development of high-tech industrial parks in Hangzhou, China and constructed a thematic model; Huang and other scholars(2020) conducted in-depth interviews for Chinese archivists and used the three-level coding in grounded theory to conduct data analysis and construct an integrated model of the archival knowledge domain to explain the interaction of consciousness, knowledge, and action in the personal archival domain. However, there is still a research gap of adopting grounded theory to understand the context of contemporary Chinese design history, especially the construction of a narrative model, which is a potential research direction to explore. Based on this, the qualitative analysis strategy of grounded theory will be applied to understand the context of Chinese contemporary design history for the first time, which can provide a database to clarify the real modernity of China, and then provide theoretical support for the subsequent research on Chinese contemporary design history.

### 3 Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Grounded Theory

This study adopts a qualitative research method of grounded theory, which is the first application of grounded theory in the study of the narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history. In order to understand the existing problems of contemporary Chinese design history, it is necessary to construct a design history narrative model that fits the contemporary Chinese context based on an understanding of the actual Chinese context. grounded theory is often used to reveal the meaning of primary data in order to construct new theoretical models. Through the basic methods of grounded theory, specific concepts can be extracted through systematic analysis of empirical data. This theory rejects theories or hypotheses that are given before the research begins and advocates the suspension of preconceptions, requiring the continuous selection, synthesis, re-selection, and conceptualization of available data in order to use the researcher's theoretical insight to develop a substantive theory grounded in the social reality and political context. In the practical tradition of grounded theory, it is more applicable to academic problems that lack theoretical explanations in particular contexts. The concepts extracted from the data can serve as theoretical preparation for constructing a narrative model of contemporary design history in China. It is of great significance to understand the special Chinese context in the study of narrative models of contemporary design history, and the application of grounded theory is precisely appropriate for explaining the contextual issues of the study. The specific steps of the study are shown in Figure 1.

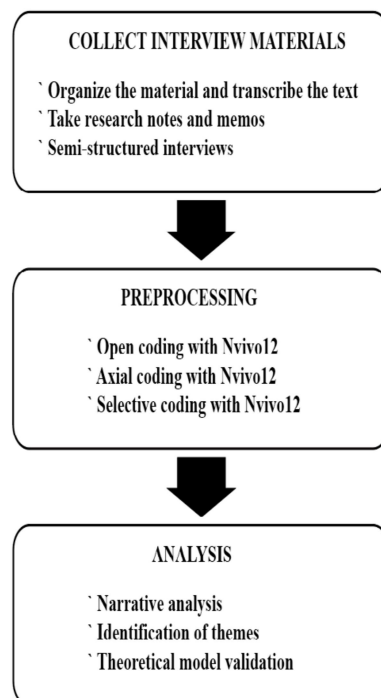


Figure 1 Research procedures based on grounded theory

In the data analysis process, three-level coding was conducted to mine and discover new theories. In the specific application of grounded theory, the research steps are divided into six main steps: data organization and preparation, reading and memoing, data coding, thematic mining, analysis results presentation, and data interpretation. In this study, the main focus is on the part of thematic mining to present the context in which the history of contemporary Chinese design is situated based on the interpretation of the core categories. The analysis process of grounded theory exemplifies how the thematic terms are generated in the data and shows the internal and external connections that exist between the various levels of coding. Data are usually collected from the moment the object of study and literature review are identified, and coded layer by layer through a bottom-up sequence, and then cascaded down to the next level, followed by the extraction of new definitions and ideas in empirical facts, and then the further discovery of classes and attributes. At the same time, computer-aided analysis methods were also combined in the process of data analysis. In the process of using the qualitative research analysis software Nvivo12, the keyword extraction is an important analysis process for grounded theory, reflecting a three-level coding process based on open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which is a bottom-up research process for constructing a theoretical framework based on data to extract and expand concepts. This analytical method of grounded theory is a corresponding way to understand the Chinese context, and can provide a theoretical basis for future research related to the history of contemporary Chinese design.

### 3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

This study used semi-structured interviews with purposive sampling to collect data. Since the research object of this study is the narrative model of contemporary Chinese design history, it is necessary to select interviewees in China to have an in-depth understanding of the Chinese context. The researcher can organize themes and form story lines around five approaches: groups, individuals, specific topics, research questions, and research tools, where groups and individuals are clued by interviewees, and specific topics and research questions are clued by themes. Therefore, the authors finally decided to select scholars within China for one-on-one in-depth interviews. The interviewees mainly included university or college teachers, contemporary designers, and other groups related to the professional field of design, all of whom have engaged in design-related research and have an in-depth understanding of design history (see Table 1 for more information). A total of 16 interviewees participated in the oral interviews that were conducted between 3 pm and 5 pm from August 1st to 15th, 2021.

The in-depth interviews were conducted separately on a one-to-one basis, and respondents were required to fill out an interview permission form in advance of the interviews. The whole interviews were recorded by audio recording equipment for subsequent transcription of the texts. In order to protect personal privacy, all answers are confidential and all identifying information will be kept anonymous. The five interview questions are as follows:

Q1. How do you think the contemporary design history narrative differs from the fine art history narrative?



Q2. Tell us about your understanding of Vasari's narrative model, Greenberg's narrative model and the Chinese context.

Q3. Tell us your understanding of the Chinese contemporary design history narrative context and approach.

Q4. What do you think are the differences between the narrative models of contemporary design history in the Chinese context and the design history in the developed Western countries?

Q5. Based on your own experience and understanding, besides the perspective of Western design history, is there any other design narrative perspective that can be used to elucidate?

*Table 1 Interviewee profiles*

No.	Nationality	Region	Age	Gender	Career
1	China	Wuhan, Hubei	59	M	Teacher in university
2	China	Gongqingcheng, Jiangxi	35	F	Teacher in university
3	China	Shijiazhuang, Hebei	35	F	Teacher in university
4	China	Shanghai	29	M	Designer in company
5	China	Wuhan, Hubei	30	F	Teacher in university
6	China	Shanghai	28	F	Designer in company
7	China	Foshan, Guangdong	31	M	Designer in company
8	China	Chengdu, Sichuan	31	F	Teacher in university
9	China	Taiyuan, Shanxi	31	M	Teacher in university
10	China	Xiaogan, Hubei	29	M	Teacher in university
11	China	Moscow, Russia	29	M	Teacher in university
12	China	Jiaozuo, Henan	29	F	Teacher in university
13	China	Xinxiang, Henan	30	M	Teacher in university
14	China	Dongguan, Guangdong	30	F	Designer in company
15	China	Wuhan, Hubei	31	M	Designer in company
16	China	Milan, Italy	31	F	Designer in company

After the interviews, the interview data were manually organized and then coded. The data were organized by converting the interview transcripts from speeches to texts through the voice conversion function of the recording software. In this process, the grammar was corrected, the format was standardized, and irrelevant answers were deleted. In the follow-up process, the collected interview data were used to support the study in the later stages. In the data analysis process, coding became the main analysis strategy, and the interview data were imported into the qualitative research analysis software (Nvivo12). Firstly, open coding was used to summarize the relevant categories of discourse meaning, and then to expand the range of attributes and dimensions of the categories. Secondly, axial coding was used to further refine the various types of categories in the open coding, while some concepts with the same or similar meanings were combined. Finally, selective coding is used to identify the core categories, which ultimately form the basic constituents for understanding the context of Chinese contemporary design history. Since the main purpose of this study is to reveal

the meaning of China's contemporary context and to prepare for the construction of future design history narrative models, the main focus in the follow-up process is on the interpretation of the core categories surrounding the issue of the Chinese context.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 Discontinuity between Tradition and Contemporaneity

Considering the discontinuity between the history of traditional and contemporary design in China is a prerequisite for understanding the Chinese context. In terms of the design history development in China, modernization is the process of the introduction of Western modernity, and the discipline of design in China only began to go global in the 1980s. The 1980s was a preparatory stage for Chinese society to move towards a modern consumer society, which was experiencing the pain of transformation from a traditional agrarian civilization to a modern industrial civilization, where the changes in the economic system and the liberation of ideas were breaking through the material scarcity and thought imprisonment. The art function did not change fundamentally, but its position changed from the past as a weapon of criticism, still serving the needs of political struggle, with the difference that artists consciously used it as a weapon of ideological and cultural criticism, the purpose of criticism being the freedom of art and thus the freedom of thought. Prior to this, traditional Chinese design was called arts and crafts, that is, design forms that had not yet been modernized. According to interviewee JZ:

The narrative model of contemporary design history in the Chinese context is distinctly different from that of design history in developed Western countries. The narrative model of contemporary design history in the Chinese context has distinct national characteristics and needs to take into account whether the narrative is in line with Chinese design and economic development. China is a developing country with a relatively short history of design in the contemporary sense and a longer history of craftsmanship in the ancient sense. Compared to China, the developed countries, represented by Europe and the United States, have a longer history of contemporary design and a shorter history of design in the ancient sense. In this way, the foundation of design history in China and the West is not the same. China has a less systematic and modernized history of arts and crafts before contemporary design, and the contemporary design emerged after the introduction of Western design ideas, while the history of Western design is a history of design in the modern sense, and design history was born after the Industrial Revolution. China does not have a complete modern design history, but a arts and crafts history, which is in the traditional rather than modern sense. (JZ, female, 30, designer in a company)

It can be seen that the modernity introduced into China from the West is a modernity that has not yet been completed, that is, the design history is in a continuous process of modernization. In contrast, the modernity in the Western sense is the completed modernity, which directly transformed from the postmodern to contemporary period. According to another interviewee JO:

The contemporary context of China is not the same as the contemporary context of the West. China is a developing country, the development of design is relatively backward. There is a historical

gap in the process due to political factors, which leads to no modern and contemporary design history in the western sense. The Western narrative model has merits for the narrative of design history in the Chinese context, but it does not mean that it can interpret Chinese contemporary design in a pertinent way. The history of Chinese contemporary design should have national characteristics and should be structurally distinct from the history of Western design. First, the narrative structure of Chinese contemporary design history should take into account the impact of the historical discontinuity and explain the causes in terms of the stylistic qualities of contemporary design. Second, the narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history should be reconstructed on the basis of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, instead of the biographical or style history in the Western sense. (JO, male, 59, teacher in a university)

The discontinuity mentioned in this interviewee's response refers to the Cultural Revolution that occurred in China in the 1960s. During this period, the path of Chinese design history took a retrograde, regressive direction due to the subversion of tradition by national political decisions, making it very different from the developed Western countries in terms of developmental qualities. In the 1980s, the 85 New Wave Art Movement refreshed the Chinese design. At the same time, the introduction of Western modern thoughts brought a brief enlightenment to the Chinese design and art circles. The essence of the movement was not an artistic achievement, but rather a movement of intellectual liberation, a movement from closure to openness, from authoritarianism to freedom, from the monopoly of academism to the pluralism of artistic creation. Modernity at this time was not only modernity in the Western sense, but special modernity formed by combining with traditional Chinese culture.

## 4.2 Spatialization of Time of historical evolution

From the spatial and temporal view of Chinese and Western design history, the process of design history in the West is basically linear, while the process of Chinese design history reflects the spatialization of time. Unlike the West, where the modern replaced the pre-modern and the post-modern transcended the modern in a disconnected development, China experiences the coexistence or spatialization of time of three different eras: modern, pre-modern, and post-modern in the same space. Due to the different social status quo, the history of Chinese design is not a linear form, but embodies a multi-linear co-existent form, as LF stated in her interview that:

The development of contemporary design history in the Chinese context is different from the development time of design history in the developed Western countries: the development time of Chinese contemporary design history is shorter, and it lacks a systematic vein combining; the development time of contemporary design history in the developed Western countries is longer, and it develops along with the classical, modern, and postmodern periods. This leads to an obvious difference in time, as Chinese design history has almost no contemporary period. At the same time, the basis of design history development in Chinese and Western countries are different. Chinese scholars tend to use their innate Chinese traditional thinking to understand design, because the Chinese culture is the theoretical source of every Chinese scholar, while Western scholars emphasize the scientific thinking way of history, with a more systematic approach to history. I believe that the contemporary Chinese design history lacks a more systematic and innovative process, and there is a separation from



the world design history. (LF, female, 35, teacher in a university)

The reason why the history of Chinese design differs from that of Western design is that Chinese scholars' way of thinking is more derived from the Chinese culture. Chinese traditional thought, represented by Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen, forms the historical basis of Chinese design history, which is a pre-scientific and imaginative way of thinking compared to the scientific approach of Western design history. Therefore, the ideological basis for the Chinese design history is clearly different from the context in which Western design history is situated. However, with regard to the perception of the context of contemporary Chinese design. XZ stated in the interview that:

The narrative model of design history in the contemporary context of China is actually a combination of Vasari's narrative model and Greenberg's narrative model. In my opinion, when talking about the general environment, it is definitely not only about the environment, but also about the designer's personal style. The current environment in China is a combination of the two. Therefore, the history of contemporary Chinese design is mixed, and the style of the designer's work is produced in the contemporary Chinese context. Contemporary designers form a composite genre based on one style, and then reflects individual styles. The Chinese contemporary context determines the stylistic expression of designers, allowing the history of Chinese contemporary design to reflect a different look from the history of Western contemporary design. (XZ, male, 31, designer in a company)

In the view of contemporary designers, the multiplicity of design styles that emerge in the history of contemporary Chinese design cannot be explained by a single traditional Western narrative model. According to the definitions of the traditional Western narrative model, the style embodied in contemporary Chinese design is neither entirely modern nor entirely post-modern, which is even influenced by a pre-modern style. For the stylistic expression of design, the attempt to reconcile East and West is a century-old dilemma faced by a whole generation of Chinese designers. Compared to the eclectic style of Chinese style on top and Western style on the bottom, the architectural modernity obtained through the formal simplicity and abstraction of "fine art architecture" is still quite progressive [17]. The diversity of contemporary design in the Chinese context has led to a history of contemporary design in China that is not at any stage in the history of Western design, but rather reflects the unique spatial and temporal qualities of the Chinese context.

#### 4.3 Contemporary Design History Dominated by Popular Aesthetics

The context in which the stylistic qualities of contemporary Chinese design were formed was created by popular aesthetics. As Chinese design is more focused on the actual needs of users, the aesthetic expression tends to be popular aesthetic, thus forming a contemporary design history with commercialized and entertaining characteristics. According to interviewee JH:

The contemporary era of China is a commercial era, which aims to satisfy mass consumption, so the Chinese contemporary context is dominated by popular aesthetics. What does mass consumption mean? That is a rather realistic aesthetic appreciation, which means a preference for gorgeous, beautiful works. The aesthetic taste of the masses triggers a change in the style of design works, and the capital market tends to adopt the best-selling design solutions. In general, I think the aesthetic perception of the Chinese public is limited to the recognition of realistic style works, and the abstract

style is obviously not so popular. This situation is difficult to change, even in 100 years. Both modern Chinese design and the narrative model of traditional Chinese design history are basically Western things. It is only since the 85 New Wave Art Movement that China has gradually come up with something of its own, and gradually realized the importance of emphasizing local culture. Likewise, it is possible to emphasize our own culture, even though we use all Western things. Although the traditional Chinese culture is still preserved, the history of contemporary Chinese design lacks the construction of an independent narrative model. (JH, male, 31, designer in a company)

It is obvious that the stylistic qualities of contemporary Chinese design history do not emphasize the aesthetics of the elite, but rather the aesthetics of the mass. Emphasizing the elite is the Western tradition of Greenberg's narrative model, which is not fit the contemporary context in which Chinese design history is situated. Chinese contemporary design is more manipulated by capital and satisfies the needs of the mass with a more realistic representation. The development of Chinese contemporary design history differs from the history of modern art styles dominated by abstraction as emphasized by Greenberg. Similarly, WZ argued in the interview that:

For the Chinese context, I see China as a country manipulated by capital. Under the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, the essence of which is more embodied in the capitalist system, there is more of a commercial focus than a creative expression in the stylistic embodiment of design. Under the influence of this Chinese scenario, which is clearly different from that of the West, contemporary design history takes on a particular shape and develops different design historical qualities, which cannot be explained by traditional Western narrative models. (WZ, female, 31, designer in a company)

Therefore, contemporary Chinese design history presents pseudo-modernity within the traditional Western narrative model. This pseudo-modernity means that it does not reveal the true picture of Chinese contemporary design history, but rather understands the path of Chinese design history from a Western perspective. However, the "new modernity", "complex modernity", "alternative modernity" and "hybrid modernity" perspectives that are prominent in Chinese modernity studies are all based on the Western perspectives. These perspectives affirm modernity, but they ignore the fact that pre-modern and post-modern factors are juxtaposed with modernity in China, and the proportions of them are changing randomly. In addition, they fail to realize the fact that Chinese modernity is still on the way, thus treating the false and unreal modernity as sufficient and real modernity [18]. It is clear that modernity in the Western sense is modernity in the universal sense, and the modernity embodied in the Chinese context is special modernity, which reflects the intertextuality of Western modernist thought and traditional Chinese culture, rather than modernity in the Western sense.

## 5. Conclusion

This study focuses on understanding the context in which contemporary Chinese design history is situated. Through the data analysis of the interview data, the core themes formed by the selective coding in the three-level coding were interpreted. According to the interviewees' responses, the contemporary Chinese context has three main features, including the discontinuity between tradition and contemporaneity, the spatialization of time of historical evolution, and the contemporary

design history dominated by popular aesthetics, which constitute the core themes of the Chinese contemporary context. The modernity embodied in the history of Chinese contemporary design can be understood as special modernity different from the Western context, and the history of Chinese and Western design together constitute the history of world design. However, due to differences in historical foundations and developmental qualities, the history of contemporary Chinese design cannot be interpreted in terms of traditional Western narrative models. In the pluralistic Chinese contemporary context, the interpretation of Chinese design history by the traditional Western narrative model tends to create a tendency of distorted interpretation, giving pseudo-modernity to Chinese design history. At the same time, a proper understanding of the contemporary Chinese context can provide theoretical support for the construction of a narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history.

Inevitably, this study has its limitations. First, this study lacks the perspective of Western scholars in the purposive sampling of interview data. Due to geographical limitations and the Covid-19, the data sampling in this study focused on scholars in China who are more familiar with Chinese design history and are situated in the contemporary Chinese context. These interviewees answered the interview questions with their own experiences and provided first-hand information for the study. In order to give the relevant studies more diverse perspectives, more interviewees' from different areas can be involved in future research. In particular, scholars who are devoted to Western design history studies can provide innovative insights for understanding the contemporary Chinese context.

In summary, this study is the first application of grounded theory in the field of contemporary Chinese design history and can provide a catalyst for understanding the Chinese context. From the results of the study, it is clear that the context of Chinese contemporary design history is different from the context of Western contemporary design history. The Chinese context embodies special modernity, while the Western context embodies a universal modernity, and it is the two different modernity of East and West that constitute the complete world design history. In order to avoid the pseudo-modernity interpretation of Chinese design history under the traditional Western narrative model, it is necessary to clarify the differences between Chinese and Western contexts. It can be seen that grounded theory can provide a new perspective for understanding Chinese contemporary contexts, and pave the way for the subsequent construction of a narrative model of Chinese contemporary design history based on objective interview data. At the same time, this study explores a narrative of Chinese design history that fits into the real situation, and empowers Chinese contemporary design history to participate in world contemporary history, thus forming a symbiotic relationship with Western contemporary design history.

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